

Montana Wildlife Federation Testimony on SB 144

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee,

My name is Tim Aldrich and I am the President of the Montana Wildlife Federation. I respectfully submit the following comments on behalf of our 23 affiliated Rod and Gun Clubs (some of whom are represented here today), and our approximately 7,000 members. We stand today in opposition to Senate Bill 144.

The MWF is Montana's oldest and largest hunter/angler based conservation organization. We were established in 1936 by Sportsmen with greatly varied occupational and cultural backgrounds. These people all had one thing in common: They were conservationists and they knew that the job of restoring wildlife populations was critically important to all of them; that getting it done would be a daunting task. In order to do so, they knew that positive political influence would be essential to protect and enhance the value of the public trust for all Montanans. Through these conservationists and the wisdom of the Montana Legislature, Montana embarked on the remarkable restoration of wildlife that has been the envy of others in our great nation and around the world.

As a state, we established an independent Commission of citizens to oversee the operations of the Fish and Wildlife agency. This system has worked amazingly well over the last 100 years, primarily because of citizen's continuing oversight of and involvement in the wise management of the wildlife resources. The citizens "police" the Commission, which in turn, polices the agency. We are the envy of the world because of our demonstrated commitment to wildlife conservation and preserving our hunting and angling heritage.

That is why we stand here today, opposed to Senate Bill 144 that will essentially preclude restoration of the wild bison, an iconic species that deserves better, much better.

Senate Bill 144 betrays over 100 years of wildlife conservation ethics and efforts in Montana. Since late in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Montanan's have set about restoring

wildlife populations that were on the brink of extinction. As a state, we restored Bull Trout, Elk, Pronghorn, Mule Deer and Bighorn Sheep. As a nation, we've restored wolves, grizzly bears, and bald eagles. However, one species has been left beside that road we have travelled; The Bison.

Senate Bill 144 precludes the citizens of Montana from engaging each other in a public dialogue related to finding a socially acceptable location and management framework for conservation of wild Bison. It precludes our neighbors, and fellow Montanans, the Tribes of Montana, from engaging in establishment of their own herds of bison to be used both commercially and in continuation of their cultures.

It precludes our Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission from fulfilling their oaths, and duties. It eliminates the voice of hunters from important wildlife management decisions. Senate Bill 144 takes away the opportunity that Montanans need and deserve to engage each other in a reasoned dialogue about bison. It further polarizes an issue which has to date produced lawsuits, buckets of blood, hysterics and what can generally be described as insane behavior. It is indeed time for us to take charge of appropriate management of bison, and along the way, assure that we don't open any door to federal management of another iconic wildlife species in Montana.

The Hunting public of Montana is not asking for bison littered across the landscape. We're asking the legislature to allow us to have a conversation with our neighbors about a valued species, the wild bison. By voting against Senate Bill 144, you will be voting for better communication between and among neighbors and the opportunities for our children and grandchildren to experience seeing wild bison on portions of Montana's magnificent landscapes. Thank you!

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